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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Northampton Community College (Pennsylvania) participated in the Exploring America's Communities project sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges. The project works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. One of the major goals of the project is the revision of two literature classes: one course was expanded to include more works by Native American, African-American, Hispanic-American, and Asian-American writers; and the other, an African-American literature class, was altered to broaden understanding about what it means to be an American. Revisions in the general literature class were made through the inclusion of new textbooks, new instructional approaches, and new course themes. Throughout the semester, the instructor was able to integrate conversations around the issues of pluralism, American identity, commonalties, and differences by encouraging small group discussions held before class and by hosting a lecture by a guest speaker. Students responded positively to this thematic approach to reading and discussing literature. The African-American literature class emphasized classroom discussions on American identity in African-American literature and the addition of new themes to the course. In the spring, the course syllabus will be revised to include more readings and expand discussion about cultural pluralism. Course materials, including a syllabus, bibliography, exam materials, and paper topics, are included. (HAA)

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Northampton Community College
Exploring America's Communities
Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE, BETHLEHEM, PA 18017

Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground

Progress Report
Sharon Gavin Levy
December 1996

My work on the AACC grant has focused primarily on two areas: coordinating the professional development presentations by Dr. Eleanor Tignor and Liza Fiol-Matta; and revising my English 151 - literature option- course and English 265G, African -American literature.

Professional Development

Dr. Eleanor Tignor conducted an all-day professional development presentation on Tuesday, October 22, 1996 on African-American literature. Faculty from the Arts and Science division as well as college administrative staff attended the workshop. Many faculty indicated this was one of the most beneficial professional development days held for English faculty. Dr. Tignor's presentation and handouts were excellent.

Liza Fiol-Matta, Dr. Tignor's colleague at LaGuardia, is scheduled to facilitate an all-day professional development workshop on Hispanic literature and culture Thursday, March 6, 1997, for Arts and Science faculty. I am coordinating this presentation with Dr. Fiol-Matta now to ensure that its format and content respond to the needs of our faculty.

Course Revisions Initiative

A major goal of this project is revising English 151 (literature option) to include more works by Native American, African-American, Hispanic-American and Asian-American writers, and revising English 265G, African-American Literature, to broaden understanding about what it means to be American. In both courses, changes were designed to initiate conversations about American pluralism and identity and to explore individual and collective commonalities and differences. To this end, I implemented the following:

<u>English 151</u>
I revised the English 151 course this fall semester, used a new textbook, and employed new instructional approaches with my students. I treated this semester as an experimental one because I wanted to "test" new strategies before sharing them with other faculty who teach the course. In previous semesters I taught the course by genre, but I felt I could best examine the concepts of plurality and identity if I taught literature by themes. Therefore, I divided the course into four major thematic topics: Initiation and identity; War, peace, freedom and justice; Love and relationships; and Family. Within each thematic subject, I assigned works by male and female

writers from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, I also included nonfiction (essays and speeches particularly), for the first time . The text, Legacies edited by Bogard and Schmidt, was very helpful because it's organized by themes and contains an extensive number of multi cultural works.

Throughout the semester I was able to integrate conversations around the issues of pluralism, American identity, commonalities and differences in the following ways:

1. Before discussing a particular work or theme, I asked students to talk in small groups about a specific subject or question. For example, I asked them to discuss "what it means to be an adult, what is a man or what is a woman " in preparation for works on initiation into adulthood. We talked about the "American dream" and its meaning to students in the class, individuals from different cultural groups and economic classes, and to individuals throughout this nation's history as we moved into our works related to peace and justice. This approach was used successfully throughout the semester.

2. The lecture by Michael Eric Dyson provided a wonderful opportunity for students to share their ideas about contemporary issues related to identity, inclusion, differences and isolation. I assigned several essays for students to read prior to Dr. Dyson's visit on October 17, 1996. Students were also given a writing assignment that required them to write an evaluative paper on the lecture and one essay. In addition, the class discussed at length the lecture, the issues raised, and their perspective and response to Dyson's thesis. Students raved about the Dyson lecture; many indicated it was the best lecture they had ever attended and others said it was the first time they had not fallen asleep during a lecture. This activity not only enhanced my endeavor to help students explore the concept of American pluralism and identity, but it also raised conversations around the issue of generational differences and commonalities.

Students responded favorably to this thematic approach to reading and discussing literature. Responses to the question "What is your reaction to reading and discussing literature thematically" included the following:

"Students can learn more about famous writers and while reading their works, they can find issues of their own lives seen by the author's character."

"I like how you split up the different themes (relationships, family, etc.). It really helped me understand how different stories of the same subject could be sometimes different/sometimes the same. I liked the discussions in class about the different themes. It really made me understand that people see the literature in a different way than I did."

"I found that reading and discussing literature thematically helps me to understand the commonalities of people and their situations. It also helped me focus on the theme of the story and cleared up some confusion."

"It really helped me out within my own lifestyle..."

The course's design and approach also facilitated conversations around American pluralism, American identity, and commonalities and divisions within society. Students were asked to respond to the question "How has work in this class changed your view about literature,specificallyy American literature, the American experience, and your American identity" and responses included the following:

"The literature we read helped me to realize even more the commonalities and differences in society....What I really enjoyed was finally getting to be taught some African-American literature..."

"Since I am not American, for me personally, almost all of the works were new issues about American society. Reading about literature helped me a lot to discover commonalities within American society."

"I think American literature is very diverse and that diversity reflects society."

"It has given me a different perspective on racial situations. I've definitely gained better insight on the problems that can occur between people of different cultures. It has also given me a greater respect of people of different ethnic backgrounds."

"Everyone sees things pretty much alike when it comes to family and relationships. Families in America are pretty much alike theses days."

"I have learned that there are a lot of problems, too many to list, in this world but an individual can make a difference in controlling his own world."

In summary, I am pleased with my initial endeavors to revise English 151. Student evaluations as well as my assessment of the quality of classroom discussion indicate that this approach can greatly enhance the course. The revisions implemented this fall not only facilitated the conversation on American pluralism and commonalities, but created a true sense of community among the students enrolled in the course. Once they began talking among themselves, that became their expectation. I observed as they shared ideas and ideals, questioned values, challenged points of view, sought consensus, and struggled to make meaning in their conversation; I applaud this learning environment and will continue my work in this direction.

English 265G - African-American Literature

During the fall, my emphasis was on classroom discussions around the experience of African-American people in the United States. I focused on several major themes: the quest for freedom, the quest for equality, the quest for identity and visibility, and the quest for self-actualization. Since the literature in this course is written by African-American writers, I used the classroom conversations to explore the issues of commonalities and divisions. For example, the concept of equality for African-Americans was discussed in the context of equality for women and the Women's Rights movement; conversations around oppression and discrimination considered bias based up gender, and class as well as race; and the class examined societal influences on men and women from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Through this approach, students explored the literature in its historical, social and cultural context. Further, they were able to draw from their individual perspectives and experiences, and become more aware of the experience of African-Americans.

One assignment that was particularly effective required students to research an African-American writer's life and times, works, artistic experience, and reception by the public and critics. Students then shared their work through an oral presentation in class. Students gained tremendous insight into the writer they studied and most used that individual as a frame of reference when discussing other writers and their works. This was an important experience because I observed students forming an important "connection" with their writer and his/her experiences.

Since one of the course goals is for students to understand more fully African-American life, culture and literature and the values and viewpoints expressed in the literature, students were asked to discuss new insights about African-American people and American literature, the American experience and their American identity on the final exam. Some of their responses follow:

> " I have learned that there is a huge body of work that I have not been exposed to, nor just by African Americans, but the books I chose for myself to read before and the books I will choose in the future are different now. There is so much to learn about America and its different people and why people are the way they are; I have a lot to accomplish."
>
> "I can actually say that this class has had an effect on the way I look at things, both culturally, socially and historically."
>
> "By studying African-American literature a person can learn about the culture and experience of African-Americans. There are enormous racial and gender divisions within this country, however there are also commonalities. By reading African-American literature this semester I learned about their rich heritage. If I could choose three words to describe the impression I got for the material we read they would be: strength, determination and love...."

> "My view of American literature has changed...My view of the American experience has been expanded by this course. As far as my American identity goes, I think I am lucky to be a part of a great melting pot that has so many beautifully different parts."

In spring 1997, I will revise the English 265G course syllabus. The goal is to identify works that can be used to supplement the course texts so conversations around American pluralism and identity can be expanded.

AACC\EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES Project: Progress Report

American Literature I Survey Course
Taught by: Dr. Len Roberts
Northampton Community College
Bethlehem, PA 18017

Following are some of the specific activities used to incorporate multicultural literature into the American Literature I course:

1. SYLLABUS: many multicultural works were newly incorporated into the American Literature I syllabus, including the following works:

CREATION OF THE WHITES (Yuchi)

Christopher Columbus, *from* JOURNAL OF THE FIRST VOYAGE TO AMERICA, 1492-1493

Samuel de Champlain, *from* THE VOYAGES TO THE GREAT RIVER ST. LAWRENCE, 1608-1612: AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE IROQUOIS; *from* THE VOYAGES OF 1615: CHAMPLAIN, AMONG THE HURON, LOST IN THE WOODS

Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, *from* RELATION OF ALVAR NUNEZ CABEZA DE VACA: CHAPTER VII, CHAPTER VIII, CHAPTER X, CHAPTER XI

John Smith, *from* CHAPTER 2: SMITH AS CAPTIVE AT THE COURT OF POWHATAN IN 1608

Mary White Rowlandson, *from* A NARRATIVE OF THE CAPTIVITY AND RESTAURATION OF MRS. MARY ROWLANDSON (Removes 1, 2, 3, and 20)

Handsome Lake (Seneca), HOW AMERICA WAS DISCOVERED

John Smith, *from* A DESCRIPTION OF NEW ENGLAND

Don Antonio de Otermin, LETTER ON THE PUEBLO REVOLT OF 1680

THE COMING OF THE SPANISH AND THE PUEBLO REVOLT (Hopi)

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *from* LETTER III: WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

Thomas Jefferson, *from* QUERY XVIII: MANNERS...THE EFFECT OF SLAVERY

(continued)

Benjamin Franklin, REMARKS CONCERNING THE SAVAGES OF NORTH AMERICA; ON THE SLAVE-TRADE

Olaudah Equiano, *from* THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO, OR GUSTAVUS VASSA, THE AFRICAN, WRITTEN BY HIMSELF (Chapters 1 and 2)

Frederick Douglass, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE

Part three of the course outline for American Literature I was also rewritten to incorporate the newly included multicultural perspective, as follows:

3.) Trace and discuss cultural and historical ideas inherent in the literature studied, including the contrasting perspectives of Native Americans and the New World settlers; the development of the New Adam in the New World; the emergence of materialism in the Enlightenment Period, and a subsequent rationale for slavery; the role of slavery and the Abolitionist movement in an expanding country; the re-emergence of the New Adam in the Romantic period, among others.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY WHICH INCLUDES MANY MULTICULTURAL SECONDARY SOURCES FOR AMERICAN LITERATURE I (see attached). This bibliography includes the following sections:

a. General: Re-Evaluations of the American Literature "Canon"

b. General: Critical Works about the Puritan Period and Its Writers

c. General: Critical Works about the Englightenment Period and Its Writers

d. General: Critical Works about the Romantic Period and Its Writers

e. General: Critical Works about Native American Writers

f. General: Critical Works about Latino American Writers

g. General: Critical Works about Afro-American Writers

h. Individual Writers: Critical Works about Individual Writers

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3. MIDTERM AND FINAL EXAMS (see attached): in addition to including quotations from multicultural works to be identified, exams also included essay questions which questioned students' knowledge of the inter-relationships of works both within and without the "Canon," as is demonstrated in the following essay questions:

a. Choosing four representative texts, one Native American, one Spanish, one English (Puritan), and another English (Enlightenment), compare and contrast the religious, political, and cultural values they reflect. Be sure to consider the individual text's evaluation of such topics as God, nature, and man, where applicable.

b. Compare and contrast the cultural purposes and literary styles (including genre choice) of the following: 1.) a Native American tale (which could include the Hopi account of "The Coming of the Spanish and the Pueblo Revolt"; 2.) Mary Rowlandson's "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson"; 3.) Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"; and 4.) Benjamin Franklin's THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY. Be sure to consider *why* these works were written, and to note why the authors selected the specific genre (type of literature) they did.

c. Please discuss the similarities and dissimilarities between Benjamin Franklin's AUTOBIOGRAPHY and Frederick Douglass's NARRATIVE, being sure to mention the writers' attitudes toward self, nature, society, and God.

4. HANDOUT: SOME POSSIBLE PAPER TOPICS FOR AMERICAN LITERATURE I. Many of these topics encourage the students to draw relationships between works produced by various multicultural groups (see attached). Two examples will demonstrate:

a. Choose FOUR of the following, and compare and contrast the perspectives they offer on what Christianity has meant to different peoples at particular historical moments. Be as *specific* as possible in your references to the relevant texts: Hopi; Yuchi; Carlos Jose Delgado; Mary Rowlandson; Cotton Mather; Jonathan Edwards; Don Antonio de Otermin; Olaudah Equiano/Gustavas Vassa; Samson Occum; Chief Seattle; Thomas Jefferson; Frederick Douglass.

b. Images of the New World. Itemize the images used by Columbus, Cabeza de Vaca, and John Smith as they attempt to characterize the New World for their European readers. Think critically about ways the images might have influenced

(continued)

a reader. Write a brief paper, about three pages, that addresses this question: Do Columbus, de Vaca, and Smith use images to present reliable descriptions or to manipulate readers?

5. MIDTERM TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT MEANT TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS' DIALOGUE ABOUT THEIR MULTICULTURAL READINGS WITH THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS. (PLEASE SEE ATTACHED RESPONSES.)

Now that you have read various accounts of slavery (as in Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Thomas Jefferson) please ask your family members and/or friends what they think about the issue of slavery. After recording their comments, evaluate them and try to determine whether they represent a Puritan, Englightenment, or Romantic view, according to the general characteristics of each age as discussed in class.

6. END-OF-SEMESTER TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT MEANT TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO EVALUATE WHETHER OR NOT THE AMERICAN LITERATURE I COURSE CHANGED THEIR VIEW ABOUT AMERICAN LITERATURE, THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, AND THEIR AMERICAN IDENTITY. (PLEASE SEE ATTACHED RESPONSES.)

How has the work in this course, such as readings, writing assignments, or class discussion, changed your view about American literature, the American experience, and your American identity? (Please address all three sub-tocpics.)

For example, have any of the works presented this semester helped you to discover, or become more aware of, commonalities and/or divisions within our society? If yes, how have such discoveries shaped your new view of what it means to be an American?

7. ONE IN-CLASS METHOD FOR TEACHING COMMONALITIES BETWEEN WORKS FROM VARIOUS CULTURAL GROUPS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE I. (PLEASE SEE ATTACHED RESPONSES.)

8. SUMMARY OF STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE MULTICULTURAL WORKS OF LITERATURE INCLUDED IN AMERICAN LITERATURE I.